

(Dossier.)

FROM NIETZSCHE TO ARTAUD:
THE RETURN OF DIONYSUS

Juan Mayorga

An epidemic where the individual is suspended and the masses are intimately tied to a horde of spirits. This is how Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, characterises the Dionysian excitement unleashed by the tragic chorus. Nietzsche attributes the major responsibility for the elimination of this transforming force of Aeschylean-Sophoclean tragedy to Euripides. The scene had been invaded by Socratic rationalism, which substituted the tragic consideration of the world for its theoretical contemplation. The conflict between liberty and need had been superseded by psychological dialogue. Mystery was sacrificed for concepts – life for science, the body for the soul, Dionysus for Apollo. Theatre was no longer able to arouse, relieve and purify the lives of the people.

Nietzsche believed it was possible to reverse this decadence: a new awakening of Dionysus. He died in 1900, mad, fifteen years before a teenager named Antonin Artaud was admitted for the first time to a psychiatric clinic. When today we read them both, when we remember their gestures, we recognise in Artaud the same thing that Nietzsche never found in his time. And we discover how hard Artaud worked so Dionysian dementia could return to the stage, something that Nietzsche had longed for all his life.

Like Nietzsche with Euripides, Artaud fought against a theatre that

makes a voyeur of the spectator, an observer of fights between characters. What interests Artaud is not the conflict between subjectivities, but another cosmic one that beats in the heart of every life: man's conflict with nature, of consciousness with the mysterious will of the whole, of the flesh with the spirit, of the human with the inhuman. Artaud wants to counter psychological theatre with metaphysical theatre. Or, better, metaphysics in action.

Like Nietzsche, when Artaud contrasts forms of theatre, he is contrasting ways of life. Artaud loathes the withered existence of the bourgeoisie, with its lack of vitriol and danger. His idea of re-founding theatre has to be understood in the context of a much greater battle against a culture that keeps a stranglehold on life. And, like Nietzsche, Artaud finds in theatre a homeland for a higher, more passionate and convulsive life; a place for intoxication in other words, for the emancipation of the repressed. Theatre shall help man recognise “his pleasure for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his fantasies, his Utopian sense of life and things and even his cannibalism”. Arousing in man his slumbering conflicts, theatre would bring him back to his place “between dream and eventuality”.

But this achievement will only be possible in a theatre of the body, where even the word will be a body rather than the crutch for a concept. There shall be no division between language and the flesh in this theatre, because its form will have to be the poetry of space and the senses – unrecordable, not to be reduced to writing. Artaud intuitively that the language of this new poetry will lie somewhere between gesture and thought, where words will have the

same importance – neither more, nor less – as dreams have.

Artaud gave his wish the name of *theatre of cruelty*. He explained that instead of cruelty he could have talked of life and need, because where there is consciousness of need we see the appearance of cruelty as a “severe moral purity that has no fear of paying life the price it demands”. Cruelty is found, tragically, where an appetite for life meets an implacable need. Artaudian theatre takes care of this appetite and this need, aware that there is no ascension without destruction.

As with the birth of tragedy, this future theatre will know no divisions between the audience and the actor, between the body and the spirit, between seriousness and laughter. It will give imaginations back their rights and, at the same time, have a highly intense sense of reality. It will be an inhuman theatre, but only because humankind is no longer ready for it, or at least not yet. This is why this theatre will unleash a crisis in modern-day man which will only be solved with death or healing. The forces of new theatre will be those of ancient magic. Nietzsche called it *epidemic*. Artaud called it *plague*.

A QUICK GUIDE FOR
CATASTROPHE-CHASING
PLAYWRIGHTS

Rafael Spregelburd

With shameful timidity I have accepted the kind invitation to contribute my pallid, obtuse reflections to this issue of PAUSA. Why with timidity? Because the nature of the questions posed in this issue are in-

timately tied to the essence (awful word) of my writing in the last few years. I suddenly feel confronted with principles that to me are so fundamental (and I have such a mistrust of the fundamental!), concepts that I have repeated so many times in front of my students and in front of myself (particularly to see if I can convince myself that there is a *method* to all this), that I am now overcome by great reluctance. However, as there is no excuse for these matters which any one could care about, I will try to sketch out in writing a very poor outline of some of my recent technical concerns, in the genuine hope that nobody will take them too seriously, as I cannot even do so myself. I do know that we should be dubious of categorical statements, especially when you make them yourself.

For some years now, the erratic planning of my dramatic production has steered me away from the study of theatrical works and drawn me closer to the observation of nature. Or at least, nature as it is depicted in books. Or at least, as it is depicted in books that do not believe in the explanations given in books on how nature operates. In other words, books on physics. On mathematics and geometry. On chemistry.

After reading these books (partially, illiterately and chaotically) I have returned again – tormented – to the contemplation of drama, to see in these previously written works (particularly in the classics that have survived through the ages and various fashions) some very intriguing things that I had not been able to notice formerly.

Having made these clarifications, I self-confidently deliver this quick inexpert guide of fundamental concerns. I have preferred to not con-

ceal my passionate educational zeal and plead forgiveness for the “Buenos Aires Student Manual” style that I have chosen to deck these reflections with.

Order and chaos

In science, a phenomenon is orderly when its movements can be described by a model of cause and effect, and this model can be depicted by a differential equation. Newton put forward the concept of the differential, and there lie his famous laws of motion, which linked the reasons for change with various forces. (Let us recall that *drama* is change, which is why it is appropriate to ask about the nature of these forces that bring about the change of things.)

Before long, the scientists of his age decided to make use of linear differential equations. These are equations that allow you to describe phenomena as diverse as the trajectory of a bullet, the growth of a tree, combustion, the operation of a machine, the resistance of a bridge over a river, in short, phenomena where **small changes produce small effects and large effects are obtained by summing many small changes**. (Is it not so that this model is rather similar to Stanislavski's explanations to an actor on objective, partial objective, super-objective, etc.? And besides, isn't this model somewhat inefficient when it comes to performing a play by, shall we say Koltés, Beckett, or Pinter, where – as the author himself declares – very often the characters are unable to define what it is that takes them to where they are, if indeed they know where they are in the first place, or if they are in a position to say something true about themselves? What is it that has

aged in Newton, and in his contemporaries, and what has not?)

It turns out that there is also a very different type of equation, which scientists of the 19th century were vaguely familiar with. These are nonlinear equations. They are specifically applied to discontinuous things like explosions, sudden fissures in materials, very high winds, etc. The problem was that these equations required mathematical techniques and forms of intuition that nobody knew of at the time. The general behaviour of non-linearity remained shrouded in mystery. Most critical situations that these scientists had to deal with could be solved using “linear approximations”. Linear approximations are a variety of differential equations. They depend on familiar intuitions and tried and trusted *reductionist* links between cause and effect. The fact is that all Newtonian physics could be classified as *reductionist*. For the reductionist, life behaves like an intricate clock, but the latter may be broken down into minimal parts. And the operation of these minimal parts can be studied and reduced to formulas. Of course, this *reductionism* masked the brusque forms of chaos, relegating certain disastrous apparitions of the real to a genuine gallery of monsters where all these impossible to perform calculations would end up.

The spell persisted until the seventies, when the appearance of high-speed computers gave scientists the tool they needed to probe the complex interior of nonlinear equations. And so arose the science of turbulence, or science of totality. Or the ill-termed “chaos theory”.

In no way is this a theory of disorder, as the more popular versions would have you believe. It is a way

of understanding a more complex order. More like the operation of the real.

Cause and effect

Consequently, and leaving aside the operation of these complicated calculations, let us look at something very simple: at the root of *reductionism* lies a highly fundamental intuition of the operation of causes and effects. Cause precedes the effect. Full stop. The effect is produced by the cause. And noting else. Reductionism considers this relationship within a system, but cannot assume the friction of other surrounding systems that could seriously affect the interior of this system.

Western drama has also been a logical reflex of this 19th century triumph of reason over reality: a simplification to stabilise the living world. We cannot say it was a bad thing. Nor can we say that the paradigm of cause and effect is not correct. It is, at least, a paradigm of reason. In the same way that any scientist who wishes to delve into the study of these complex formulas needs, in turn, to understand how the Newtonian world works. This drama we are talking about played its role very well: it stabilised a possible version of human complexity, and it did so thanks to certain formulas which – without realising – it had inherited from the conception of the world that the physics of the time murmured in its ear at nights.

However, things have changed, at least in the way that physics sees the world. Of course, this physical discourse no longer murmurs to us at nights, it barely stammers when it can. Because the complexity of this system of demonstrations about the nature of reality is so vast

that it often has the appearance of a logic that leaps over the causes to reach the effects.

And this, precisely, is the most accurate definition of *catastrophe*.

It is a matter of speed. In a catastrophe, causal systems turn at such a speed that the effects seem to precede the causes. The events occur and – to the casual observer – they are *pure effect*, they bury their causes.

As we are animals of reason, there is a great fascination with the disastrous. The effect that seems to lack any causes enlivens and excites our expectations. While causal links, when they are simple enough to follow, only plunge us into boredom.

The physics of Western narrative fiction is changing.

If the classic paradigm was once tragedy (a stylised way of saying something about man's fate; a causal complex where an inherent weakness of the character drags him in a straight line towards his total destruction), today we can at least doubt the veracity with which this form describes our intuition of how the world works.

Tragedy and catastrophe

The problem is not so much attempting to define how a catastrophe operates in stylistic terms (which would make it a passing, formalist fancy). The question that really lies behind the entire affair is a somewhat more extra-theatrical question: what is the nature of man in our time, and consequently, how should it be depicted?

Does the depiction that man makes of his finiteness continue to be trag-

ic? If for the Greeks human nature was basically tragic (and hence tragedy could stage the unthinkable, the *undecidable* and the horror of the unnameable), since Beckett, man's nature has become at least basically ridiculous, and not tragic. Is Beckett's theatre similar to poor Newton's gallery of monsters?

If somewhere in Western Aristotelian thought anyone believed that there were two alternatives to depicting what underlies a community of consciousness (tragedy or comedy), now it seems to be clear, at least, that it is not just tragedy that is anachronistic (at least as a formal model). Far more anachronistic is the schizophrenic idea of a certain reductionist bipolarity: the tragic versus the comic, condemning the greys to oblivion in favour of pure black and white.

Nobody, in scientific terms, could now discuss the relativity of Newton's reductionist calculi that have governed a good part of the history of thought. The ill-termed "chaos theory", or better known "science of totality", offered, like a Gospel with numbers and formulae, as many interpretations as you liked, from the more scientific and precise attempts to the more New Age frivolity and marketing. The trouble is that chaotic models, and their fabulous monstrous inventions with a first name, second name and alias (fractals, iterative functions, non-Euclidean geometry, butterfly effects, solitons, etc.), have yet to construct a *pregnant image*. A shape as convincing (and lying if you like) as the circle or the square. A murmur in the night, fearsome but clear.

In other words, the acceptance of the chaotic operation of things depends more on the internalisation of its conventions than on its scientific

exactitude. This is why it becomes a kind of *creed*.

A discovery does not just become true when its efficiency is proven but, especially, when it is linked to a use or immediate appearance. If someone told me right now that the earth was not round, but flat, and that it rested on a sea held up by four huge elephants, how much *real* evidence – that is to say, within arms' reach, here, in my home and verifiable by the naked eye – can I present to show it is not so? Little. None. I think we are at a time of transition, of change of thought, and therefore a series of discoveries that could be easily proved seem more like a dark, indefinable packet that holds all our fantasies and fears of the unknown, while there is still no sign – with popularity and widespread acceptance – of a *form* that reduces experience to a single *image*. Newton's apple falling from the tree is an image that coalesces a corpus of explanations! Its placid and *pre-modern* iconology is, obviously, more unstable than the paradigms of Koch Island or Peano's Curve

But let me get to what interests us, creators of new fables. In terms of narrative, chaotic *arguments* (which are, if I were asked my opinion, more real than the old formula of introduction/climax/denouement) mostly generate nostalgia for that lost paradise of the falling apples, before leading us into a legitimate world with its own rules. I mean to say, we can see the new story, enjoy it and so on, but the first we see is its **non-similarity** to what we used to take as true. So every time a writer meanders down less Aristotelian or (as I prefer to call them) Newtonian paths, he is not condemned (as we are too grown up for that) but is pointed out as "different". Every pe-

culiarity, every "new author", seems to start with the act of questioning the prior model. And the prior model is old. It is impossible to not be a "new author"! Absolutely impossible!

But something even more disturbing occurs: good "old" authors also tend to be "new authors". We know how the classics (Chekhov, Shakespeare, Joyce, Beckett) have become classics by breaking something that preceded them, and if they became famous it was precisely for inaugurating something, something that would not have happened without them.

What are we contemporary authors left with? This is an age which – in contrast to those we can study and compare ourselves to – celebrates novelty with an exaggerated passion. And throws into one enormous "bag of novelties" some serious attempts (and by serious I mean "playful, erratic and investigatory") alongside mere formats of fashion, repetitive handicrafts of something presented as "better" because it looks "more modern".

I will try to take a simple example so as to leave something established on the fundamental difference between (a) *copying a format* that is suddenly fashionable and that the critics (always arriving late) will simply classify as post-modern and (b) *experimental investigation* – as there is no other way – as a mischievous scientist would deal with it in *the complex nature of the real*.

Let us have a look. Telling a story from back to front (to take a simple example that we writers who do not think in straight lines are tempted to use) does not in itself imply some major modification of the principles of Newtonian (reductionist) narra-

tive. What is more, it can only accelerate the appearance of nostalgia for this lost model, this paradise from which we have been expelled.

The key, by necessity, is to question the nature of *time*; something that, since the appearance of thermodynamics, should have been taught in acting schools, much more so than *Oedipus* or *Lorca*.

The nature of time is, in the eyes of scientists of catastrophe, a fascinating subject. Here, furthermore, we find the majority of the unanswered questions on which human desire depends. Which is the desire to understand.

Continuing with my example, I would like to quote a now classic work that I like very much: *Betrayal*, by Harold Pinter. The play succinctly tells the story of the relationship between Jerry and Emma, his best friend's wife, and the painful, anaesthetised passage where she brings adultery and finally loneliness into her marriage. The storyline could not be more bourgeois. The values at stake (faithfulness, the children, friendship, bourgeois literature, the publishing industry, etc.) could seem pale realist reflections of the conflicts experienced by a unique group of spectators, the petit-bourgeoisie, who meet in the theatre to see themselves portrayed. But no. Pinter narrates the story from the end to the beginning, and by this simple, tempting action discovers the stagnant nature of our thought: the alteration of natural order between cause and effect (as by definition cause always precedes effect) produces such a strange feeling, so unique, that this alleged bourgeois identity, which is impregnated with conflict that should not be of much interest in theatre, well-deservedly passes to the background. Pinter's

marvellous skill with this play lies, in my opinion, in showing part of the fierce nature of time, and the scandalous slowness of our perceptions, governed as it is by the Western, Judaeo-Christian moralist principle which insists that things *advance* to their end. Here we find a paradigm as clear as Newton's apple, and probably no less untrue, but better rooted as a subconscious image of a community of consciousness than, for example, the paradigm of positivist entropy, or Schrödinger's cat, whose owner dared pose a question as beautiful as it was complex: What is life? It is the same question that good works of art invariably pose.

When Jerry finds out that Robert knew of his relationship with his wife but said nothing, the supposed traitor feels betrayed. What to say of the spectator? And why is the party in the final scene of the play – which, in reality, is the first scene in chronological terms – where Jerry makes his first advances towards Emma, and she lets him, so distressing to us? Is the distress a product of the fracture of our more or less bourgeois values? No. It is something much deeper than that, more radical. It is our atavistic fear of the ending of the world as a causal unfolding, a terrible yet reasonable unfolding.

Fiction and friction

And there is a greater problem yet. A work of art is not a scientific investigation. For that we already have the sciences, with their methods for seeking truth. In art, truth appears in a very different fashion. It appears as a **life-providing depiction**, like a **scale model**, that is true (and therefore induces emotion, in other words, a non-lexicalizable psychological response)

while the reception lasts. It is because of this – its great freedom to work with forged models, and its playful spirit – that sometimes art (or better said, man's *creative* nature, not his *verifying* one) illuminates science when the latter sees no way forward.

Art produces the images that as yet have no verbal category in a community of consciousness: this is why they are precisely **image** and not **idea**. Art invents both the messages it puts within the reach of the world and the grammar that conveys them. This is the fundamental mission of fiction. We tend to lose sight of how important our mission as creators of fiction is, as stewards of the oxygenating forest of **what does not occur in real life**.

And here lies the paradox that attracts me the most:

We very often find ourselves upholding that theatre (like any other form of artistic expression) is interested in life, in how life operates, whether we think it lies in the complex nature of time, or in the psychological complex of perceptive man, or in the linguistic nature of the brain that "speaks" of reality. We therefore tend to repudiate *realism*, and in exchange point to the avant-gardes as an example to follow (avant-garde being a word exclusively tied to the dawn of the 20th century). Avant-gardes which sought to "dismantle" the realist illusion, and explore the complex yet real nature of chance (Dadaists), of the subconscious (surrealists), of language (absurdists), etc. It is easy, very easy, to criticise realism and more or less link it to an "artisan" (and not artistic) attitude of symbolically depicting a single social class, with its scope and limitations, because realism (which after

all is also an "ism" and not a really trustworthy apparition of the "real") operates by mimesis.

But mimesis of what?

Of what is already known.

Those of us who have studied chaotic phenomena and the complex (sometimes optimistic) nature of catastrophe tend to call our creations "realist". If my perception of time is confused (and it is obvious that everybody else's is too), why do I believe that the principle of Aristotelian ordering, with its introduction, climax and denouement, is more "real"? If I look at reality, should we not accept that the model of works that only have a "climax", for instance, is more "realist"? For some time now I have been trying to write a work that consists of pure climax, for example. It is a fascinating exercise, and it is a more honest way of leaving a statement of how I see the world around me.

In other words, the paradox lies in the fact that an observation that is more refined, more current, more interested in the incipient complex paradigms of reality should lead to works that *are more akin to real life*. More vital. More organic. This is why earlier on I mentioned that some of us hold that our outrageous fictions are "realist": they are attempts at capturing *something* of the real, casting away the old veil of the real as a moral construction of the bourgeoisie. The circles and squares of Euclidean geometry do not exist in reality: there is no living body that responds to this form. This is what led Benoît Mandelbrot (who was bored with traditional geometry) to discover the significance of non-Euclidean geometry and christen the *fractal*, a fabulous geometric form, and to discover the

fractal dimension of living objects.

We could again read the classics and discover that the patina of culture that has been painted over them makes us believe things that are not true. For instance, that Othello is jealous. We have heard it a thousand times: that *Othello* is a play about jealousy, that the Moor is jealous, that his jealousy drives the tragedy. Let us take a closer look. Othello is neither a circle nor a square. His dimensions are not quite so simple. Dimensions are never simple with good artists. *Othello*, as a play, is a system of frictions, of worlds in collision, Casio worlds, Desdemona worlds, Othello worlds. And to portray him today, it would be of little use to the actor who embodies him for the director to say "I want you to show the jealousy". This is not possible. Because, on top of it all, Othello is not jealous. If he were, the play would be trivial. Othello is disastrously placed in a *jealous situation*, which is not the same. Some features of the great works advance linearly, but beneath the surface other features jump out at the abysmal captivating speed of a catastrophe. How to explain, otherwise, the shocking fate of Romeo and Juliet? We can read this work as a tragedy, very much in vogue at its time: the young couple's irrevocable love is what will lead them to their deaths. But I suspect this is a Newtonian reduction. Juliet's plan is perfect: it only fails because the letter she sends Romeo (telling him that she will not be dead in the family crypt, but only sleeping and waiting) goes irremissibly astray. Why does the letter that Fray Lorenzo should have delivered get lost? Shakespeare knows the answer very well. Catastrophe! The wonderful thing about some of these brilliant works is that they come tailored with equal parts of

order and chaos, like Mandelbrot's *fractals*. And it is in this relationship that the vital appears, systems that – on account of their being alive – are indispensable, fascinating, and possess a complex logic. Bridges are built using Newton's laws, but collapse owing to the laws of chaos. Poor works are dead, lifeless, without body, inasmuch as they only refer to abstract symbols, to circles and squares, but not to living beings.

I have allowed myself to play with these fundamental observations on certain classic models because I assume we all attribute them with a formerly accepted effectiveness. However, this is not my main concern, as I have never staged a classic, and have little interest in doing so while I still have a deplorably long list of plays in my head still to write. The hardest part is trying to challenge these undeniable, recent classic models. Especially the more recent: Beckett, Pinter, Joyce, Koltés. All of these have done something to theatre that compels playwrights to *respond* if we wish to continue with this odd trade of *creating stories to be seen*. And one of the healthy trends I have lately seen in drama (at least in Argentinean drama, which is the one I am most familiar with) is the overcoming of the false dichotomy to which the ghost of realism had reduced us to. I mean to say, we are as bored with attempts at the realist portrayal of a specific social class (ours) as we are with its apparent opposite: desperate attempts to break this mimesis; plays with actors who, in order not to lend weight to the "reactionary" idea of realism, put on red noses, or paint themselves white, or use masks with anthropological significance, or authors who resort to little word games that simulate the absurdity of those beauti-

ful, ancient avant-gardes. I do not think there is any need to waste energy on trying to distance oneself from a model (the realist one) that in itself is already a fantasy, especially if we just end up in other mimetic models that are equally or more unstable, because they seem more like theatre for its own sake than living things. In other words, what is a clown? Something that only seems to exist in certain theatrical works. And that, in any case, is not very funny. I do not know of one single child that has ever enjoyed himself when faced with a clown.

Or let us think, in that case, of cinema: its resource – its grammar – has always been mimesis (a dead man in film looks much more like a real dead man, with blood, bullet holes and all, than in theatre), and it would be hard in film to accept the stylisations that seem to form part of theatrical grammar. Regardless of the next question (what is this grammar?) which, for now, I would prefer to leave aside, I sometimes wonder how cinema, freed from the weight of resolving the problem of this mimesis, was able to accept fantasy – and pure, very pure, fiction – as the basic tool of its art. Meanwhile theatre still has many debts to pay before being accepted as an art devoted to the **narration of what does not occur in reality**. Or at least, in reason. Occurrences, events that because of this we need to see in the theatre.

Yet, it is here – in this paradox – that theatre and living things are so strongly connected. The mimesis I speak of in theatre, the one I want, is that of the complex operating models of causes, effects and catastrophes in life, and not the reductionist copy of the alleged architects of life. I am not interested in copies

of people as circles or squares (figures or “little people”, as they could easily have become known). I am interested in the mimesis of living systems, of their rhetorical forms (life has them, and I have found more rhetorical figures in physics books than in poetics). And it also interests me for these systems to be presented as fiction. Pure fiction. A lie presented as such. A lie that is only true because whoever sees a work accepts playing the game without placing conditions on what the work is proposing. I find it hard to accept – for now – that theatre could or should fulfil any other function.

ACCEPTING CATASTROPHE, CELEBRATING CHANCE

Diana González

Picture a scene where a man is calmly walking down the street on a sunny spring morning. On this pleasant walk he lets himself get carried away by the peace brought on by the sun shining on his face, the gentle breeze, the flowers on balconies and the laughter of children playing in the parks. At this moment the man feels an easy, complete happiness. However, in an unexpected instant, a piano falls from a nearby window and suddenly crushes him. “What a tragedy!”, would say anyone who had witnessed such a bitter event, and his friends and family on receiving the news, “Poor man!”. Yet, nevertheless, we feel that the hero of this brief story cannot be identified with Oedipus, Orestes, Phaedra or Antigone. We know nothing about this man, we have not had enough *time* to investigate his motivations, to think about what he leaves behind in this world, of what could

have caused such a brutal ending and how this fits into the rest of his life before a piano crossed his path. Arthur Miller reflects on the *tragic genre* with this example and defines it in the following way: “tragedy arises when we are in the presence of a man who has failed in trying to achieve happiness. But happiness has to be there, the promise of a fair way of living has to be there. Otherwise pathos takes control, creating that impotent human image, without meaning and essentially false: the image of that defenceless man under the falling piano, of that man totally lost in a universe that, by its nature, is too hostile to control”.¹ Without knowing the previous details of this individual’s life, the scene in itself seems absurd to us and we automatically associate his entire existence with the image of the piano crushing him. It would have been different if this man’s fate had previously declared that he would be run over by a piano, because then we would have seen his failed attempts to escape such an ending and have seen him tangled in a vicious circle every time he tried to defy his destiny. Each and every attempt by Oedipus to “do things well”, to dodge hidden forces that even he did not suspect, brought him dizzily closer to his end. It is precisely for these reasons that I think that the example of the man and the piano cannot be considered anything but a comic gag and not because of what Miller says about it, as any “fair way of living” is rescinded in tragic works.

In 1824, Goethe provided one of the most accurate definitions of tragedy in a letter to chancellor Von Müller, “Everything tragic is based on a contrast that allows no escape. As soon as an escape appears or seems possible, tragedy melts away.” In effect, a tragedy is a trap that de-

mands, at the same time, that we be fully aware – both as spectators and the protagonist who experiences the situation – of what this involves, of the extent to which the structure of the whole play was impossible to avoid. If we let this idea pass us by and think that every human being is inexorably heading to his death, from this point of view, any existence would be tragic. Along these lines, religions that do not conceive of death as an absolute end but rather as an *interval* that leads to *another world*, another chance at redemption, lie at the opposite end of tragedy. As George Steiner puts forward, “where there is compensation, there is justice, not tragedy”,² which would ultimately imply accepting that such plays see human life as a misfortune,³ that is to say, human beings, precisely due to their condition of being human, are damned. Steiner, however, does not generalise this premise to the entire tragic genre, and only defines as “absolute tragedy” all works that are based on this. Nevertheless, what to Steiner is a form of the genre, for Trias is the exact definition of tragedy: the annulment of all compensation.⁴ Along these lines, the tragic character is condemned to eternally wander like a vagrant without identity, separated for ever from his home, as is the case with Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* or the lead character in Christopher Nolan’s *Memento*. The two examples give a good idea of what draws classic and contemporary tragedies together and what separates them.

Oedipus corresponds to the classic tragic model of stubbornly taking on *fatum* in a fight that is already lost beforehand and will lead to the loss of the hero’s own identity.⁵ Leonard Shelby, however, does not fight a previously woven fate, rather it is he himself who constructs one

despite the absurdity of continuing a story based on his own imagination.⁶ In Chekhov’s major plays, such as *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*, the author took care to portray this human peculiarity of creating absurd situations for oneself that one is not at all happy with but which, however, one cannot find a solution to. Leonard’s final words are revealing in this regard because with them he acknowledges that perhaps his plan for revenge may be of his own making, but, considering that this chain of persecutions and murders is the only thing that gives meaning to his life, he assumes *self-deception* as an essential characteristic of human beings and by way of motivation to continue living. To what extent the protagonist of *Memento* could come to other conclusions or think of his situation in another way is something that, even in contemporary tragedy, is always called into question. Since tragedy is a genre that undertakes a profound exhaustive analysis of human nature, and as human beings easily resort to self-deception even when fully aware of this, we might come to the conclusion that their nature prevents them from setting themselves free. As Trias adds, “the tragic and heroic conscience of modern man consists of his inflexible commitment to significance, despite his happiness and almost always at its expense”.⁷

Following these words, Miller’s definition is again vague. The attainment of happiness is relegated to the background in contemporary tragedy. Leonard Shelby does not seek it, he is even aware that revenge will not bring it and yet, despite this, he forges ahead, like Irina in *The Three Sisters* he believes his own lies in order to endure the time he has remaining. In contemporary tragedy, therefore, the protagonist

takes on relevance to the detriment of fate. As there are no gods to pull the strings, it is the characters themselves who impose misfortune, which in this way is always linked to the absurd that involves its own self-imposition. This is how tragedy discredits our trust in human reason that the thinkers of the Enlightenment advocated. This desire to dominate the world, to create it in our image and likeness, to control any irrational force in order to attain absolute freedom, to give predominance to human beings above the will of God, paradoxically brings about a renaissance of fate fostered by this naïve craving for liberty. How do we then express this misfortune in contemporary tragedy? In principle it is the character himself who decides at his pleasure, however, despite the self-imposition of a destiny, all the elements in the play should point to the fact that the protagonist could not have acted in any other way.

The man in Miller’s anecdote, however, cannot profit from his decisions because the appearance of the piano is a totally accidental event. The presence of chance underlines the *absurdity* of the story precisely because it opens the possibility that things could have developed in another way, as nothing leads you to think that the fall of the piano could have been caused by some superior force. It does not seem that this piano would be like the statue of Mitys at Argos which, as Aristotle tells us, “killed the author of Mitys’ death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle”.⁸ Chance never bursts onto classic tragedies, where each element tallies with a previously laid out plan that is followed step by step. In contemporary tragedy, however, where the character constructs his destiny gradually, the accidental may very

easily appear and alter the course of events.

Pianos often fall from the sky on contemporary stages. How else would you describe the sudden explosion in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*? An *irrational* event of unknown cause – in accordance with Spregelburd’s idea⁹ – that meshes perfectly with the chain of *misfortunes* that form the play. In this *chaos* the audience, together with the main character, have the opportunity to discern an order by resorting to its disposition to interpret the collection of events as less chance-like than at first seemed. Following Baudrillard’s theory on this point, we humans are given to “constantly inventing causes to exorcise the prestige of their appearance. Always inventing a meaning to exorcise their appearance, to delay their too swift unfolding. This reversibility of causal order, this reversal of effect on cause, this precession and this triumph of effect over cause, is essential. We may call it paramount, fatal and original. It is the way of destiny”.¹⁰ Contemporary writers take recourse to what we may call “the accidental piano” so that the irrational¹¹ bursts onto the text but in a way that meshes, in an *order* that is consistent with the hermeneutics of the play owing to the process of reception. In this way, the absurd, casual event, introduced for no apparent reason, because chance bursts into our daily lives all the time, will in the end have the same relevance as Mitys’ statue. Chance is therefore interpreted as fate. Coincidence becomes causality.¹²

For Steiner, the fact that misfortune should be the *conditio sine qua non* for the tragic genre turns it into a *negative ontology*, as it annuls the attainment of happiness and, according to him, what is the

point of an art that eliminates the basic purpose of all human existence? For Steiner, the *negativity* that tragedies shut in is condemnable and difficult to put up with if the play is too long. Also, he continues, due to their hardness, due to the large abyss they contain, tragedies will probably adopt a *fragmentary* form, as “the vision they hold is unbearable, because the contemplation and acquiescence of the abyss – when these are honest, when they are not a parody of *pathos* or a capricious and adulterous metaphor – should force us to cross the boundary”.¹³ I feel that this reflection by Steiner rests on an untrue foundation. Is it really because it exhibits this “abyss” that the tragic genre should adopt a *fragmentary* form? What happens then to the successive, circular structure, perfectly ordered according to Aristotelian premises of classic tragedies? And how many contemporary artistic works that do not adapt to the genre are not written in a *fragmentary* form? We have the examples of the theatre of Martin Crimp, of Caryl Churchill, of Roland Schimmelpfennig, as well as the *deconstructed* montages of Frank Castorf, René Pollesch, John Jesurun and Jan Lauwers, to give a few examples. All of these adopt a similar form, with their multiple variants, which meshes with the *poetics of fragmentation*. If the structure of these works seems chaotic, distorted and unfinished according to the theory of art that precedes us, it is because they reject the structural linearity that respects the order of beginning, climax and denouement, often on account of the elimination of the latter.

According to Eugenio Triás, in tragedy we often see an *infinite deferral of the end* or the illusion of

an *unfinished work*.¹⁴ For Triás, this is the worst misfortune that could be imposed on the protagonist – we could think of the works of Beckett – condemning him to an endless wandering in which he will eternally carry the weight of guilt on his back. This homelessness is the result of the loss of faith in major Western myths: the scepticism of a final coming that will allow us to cross the threshold of a pleasant “eternity” united to the same worry of a wait that we have no idea where it will lead us. As Reyes Mate argues, in our day “what is at stake from the metaphysical point of view is time. The announcement of the death of God is an announcement made by Lady Time, as eternal as God, more immortal than all the other gods. Time raised to the category of a myth of our age transforms the being into an incessant evolution with no more meaning than its own duration”.¹⁵ Walter Benjamin in his “Theological-Political Fragment” speaks of these two dimensions of time – the *continuum* or empty time and *interruption* or full time – that advance, like arrows, in two opposite directions. Bearing in mind this theory, the time of tragedy should be the mythic, which is contextualised in a *continuum* without end and is reawakened after the disappointment with the Western obsession for progress undertaken during the Enlightenment. At the beginning of the 21st century, despite the realisation that our trust in progress could be little more than an entelechy, are we ready to free ourselves from our desire for progress?

As David Mamet adds in *Three Uses of the Knife*, we human beings are unwilling to conceive that things happen in our daily lives simply on their own, without order or accord, stupidly and casually. If

the classic structure sought to rescind this feeling of *randomness*, contemporary art, on the other hand, generally aspires to the complete opposite: attempting to express fragmentation and chance through an artistic structure that by definition implies an order, but an order that does not betray the chaos that governs our existence and which is to inevitably manifest itself in a controlled fashion. In this respect, the structure adopted by tragedies in our time – Beckett, Kane, Barker in theatre; Nolan’s *Memento*, Allen’s *Matchpoint* or Michael Haneke’s *Caché* in film – is no different from other contemporary works that concern themselves with subjects other than tragedy. Following the scientific theories of relativity and chaos, contemporary art points in other directions, it responds to another mentality distinct from past ages. The unique, the truly significant thing of our days, is that we often have – or at least there is an attempt to have – a perfect adaptation between chaos and randomness which writers attempt to capture in their works and the way they express these. However, we need to find a term other than the *poetics of fragmentation* to refer to this new structure to which contemporary playwrights increasingly take recourse, as the form their works adopt is equally complete and if they are called *fragments* it is only due to the influence of the theory of traditional art.

Probably with the aim of conferring *uniqueness* to contemporary tragedy and collecting the differences I have mentioned into an independent term that distinguishes it from the classic meaning, various learned people and writers for the theatre like Rafael Spregelburd or Howard Barker,¹⁶ increasingly resort to the

term *catastrophe*. This is not really a new word, as it is employed in Aristotelian theory to designate one of the parts of tragedy, which precisely corresponds to the moment when a crucial turnabout is taken that precipitates the plot line to the fatal denouement.¹⁷ Beckett himself gave this title to one of his works, emphasising the importance of this instant in classic tragedies where the character begins to perceive the denouement that approaches and questions it at the same time, given that in a *catastrophe* there is no one crucial moment that is distinguishable from the rest, rather the entire work is concentrated around the same point. The reason for this other way of understanding *catastrophes* is again the formal fragmentation of contemporary works and the review of classic linear structure. Here, the new formulation of the concept of *catastrophe* seems appropriate to represent contemporary tragedy, as both formal aspects – fragmentation of discourse – and thematic ones – the loss of confidence in the final coming – intertwine in the assumption of *randomness, contingency* and *chance*, which through hermeneutic violence are fatal.

Now, summing up, try to imagine a man who, from childhood, was forced to enrol for piano lessons. He hated them, yet finally managed to become a privileged student, he even composed his own scores. One day he finished a melody and when he was about to play it to a large audience, among which his thrilled parents were sitting, he took revenge for that first imposition of his infancy playing each note out of tune and deliberately disappointing the expectations of those who had trusted in him. Some time later, on a sunny spring morning, he was walking down the street over-

whelmed by the happiness that the beginning of spring induced in him when, all of a sudden, a piano that movers were lifting from their lorry to a nearby balcony, fell inches from the toes of his shoes. The man felt stunned, thought that it was a divine signal and repented for having abandoned his career as a composer so rudely. Thenceforth, he tried unsuccessfully to remember all the scores he had composed and destroyed after his act of revenge. To this day, in his desperation, he continues to try and remember.

¹ MILLER, Arthur. *Textos sobre teatro norteamericano (IV)*. Lyon: University of Lyon, 2000. Introduction, translation and notes by Antonio R. Celada, p. 61.

² STEINER, George. *The Death of Tragedy*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1963, p. 4.

³ In *Pasión intacta*. Madrid: Siruela, 1997. Translation by Menchu Gutiérrez and Encarna Castejón, pp. 103-120.

⁴ TRIÁS, Eugenio. *Drama e identidad o bajo el signo de interrogación*. Barcelona: Barral, 1974, p. 81.

⁵ It is important to specify that I am referring to *Oedipus Rex* and not *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the identity of the lead character is ultimately recognised and he wins the compensation of a splendid fate. Both elements do not belong to the tragic genre and the second part of *Oedipus Rex*, therefore, cannot be considered tragedy, as indeed Triás declares.

⁶ The fact that Leonard Shelby has lost his short-term memory following the traumatic experience of his wife’s murder only accentuates the absurdity of drawing up a plan for revenge that he cannot completely control. The list of alleged guilty characters is endless as Shelby instantly forgets every murder he commits, which deprives him of attaining his revenge. I feel that the director resorted to his pro-

tagonist’s illness to justify his actions and not simply present him as a murderer, in which case he would have taken the risk that the audience might divert their attention from Shelby’s *need* to carry out his plan.

⁷ Op. Cit., p. 212.

⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*: VIII, 1452a.

⁹ For Spregelburd, there is a relationship between *chaos* and *catastrophe* in the construction of an action that “emphasises effects”, so that we are unable to “track causes”.

¹⁰ BAUDRILLARD. Op. cit., p. 175.

¹¹ Any accidental event is irrational. In a world dominated by God, chance does not exist, as everything that occurs responds to the model of cause and effect, according to divine justice. In classic tragedies, too, there is no place for chance components, because each action meshes in a *fatum* already present from the outset. However, this *fatum* does not respond to the logic of cause and effect, it simply is, and reason cannot do anything against its injustice.

¹² Jean Baudrillard deals with this play between chance and misfortune in “Fatal, or Reversible Imminence”

¹³ Op. cit.

¹⁴ TRIÁS, Eugenio. *Drama e identidad o bajo el signo de interrogación*. Barcelona: Barral, 1974, p. 81.

¹⁵ MATE, R. *Retrasar o acelerar el final. Occidente y sus teologías políticas*. In: www.ifs.csic.es/holocausto/crisis/mate.pdf.

¹⁶ According to Barker, contemporary tragedy or *catastrophe* is one of the genres that best defines contemporary thought and its artistic concerns. Barker, who in his two theoretical texts on his conception of theatre – *Arguments for a theatre*

and *Death, the one and the Art of Theatre* – explicitly declares himself to be a writer of tragedies, considers that through *catastrophe* theatre confronts the authoritarianism of Western socio-political systems and the “pretended transparency” of the mass media because it openly speaks of death without the promise of *paradise* and rejects these false principles of *eternal youth* and the fear of facing our own nature.

¹⁷ KUNZ, Marco. *El final de la novela*. Madrid: Gredos, 1997, p. 42.

THE CHIMERA OF TRAGEDY

Francesc Calafat

I

Contemporary tragedy. Just saying the word gives you a bit of a fright, it is like seeing twenty-five centuries of history falling on your head. It is as if the whole web of questions and problems recorded on the living skin of theatre over time were to appear in your fist, all of a sudden. For this reason, and to put a bit of order to my ideas, I will start my digression with *Antigone*, by Espriu, because it leads to a very enlightening fact about the subject I am about to embark on: in the same text, we move from one version that is faithful to the classic conception of the tragedy, written in 1939 and published in 1955, to a now openly modern one, in the 1969 edition.

In the first version, Espriu pares the classic tragic fable down to the bone and reduces it to the essential components: the fratricidal war, the pain caused by the disappearance of loved ones. The tragic outbreak is visualised through the frontal clash between two desires: Antigone, who represents the custom of burying

dead family members, and Creon, representative of the law and the city, who refuses to bury Polynices for being a traitor. In the final version, Espriu offers us an ultimate surprise: the introduction of a sceptic, ironic character, the Lucid Counsellor, who disrupts the classic seriousness and contributes a new point of view, bringing out the dissenting voices of the Chorus and Hemon in Sophocles’ work. In a word, this ambiguous individual introduces a new ambiguity to the already ambiguous space of the tragedy.

Now we have come to the point we wanted. Carles Miralles, a reputed Hellenist and author of a very good critique of Espriu’s *Antigona* (Antigone), acknowledges the contribution of this remarkable character, even though he feels that the play completely loses its nobility and the “sententious ending of classic tragedy” with the appearance of this character, because “the grotesque has the ability to pervert tragic compassion by leading it to the world of the ridiculous and the taunt”.

Let us come down from myth to our uncertain reality. The Royal Counsellor suffers the effects of Creon’s new authoritarianism in his own skin. And “from the viewpoint of confused life, in other words, suffering” he examines the events that occur and describes the characters as pathetic individuals, victims of their own words, of their delusion. The words of Antigone and Creon do not constitute an absolute, only and exclusive truth. Nor were Sophocles’s. After all, the Counsellor wants to tell us that life is a major unsolvable conflict, a clash of morals and interests, and that human relations are furrowed by areas of shadow that make it impossible

to curtail the difficulties of understanding one another. With the reflections of the new character we pass from the circle of misfortune in the classic *Antigona* to the circle of causality, which Hegel saw with clairvoyance in *Aesthetics*, one of the most clearly defining features of modern tragedy.

The Greek tragedies lay on the table the fact that moral value is vulnerable to history and, consequently, all values are vulnerable. So the Lucid Counsellor’s speech raises such fundamental questions as: To what extent is our own life independent? What role does reason play in all this? And, what kind of independence is the most appropriate for leading a reasonable life? To what extent can we put up with chance in our lives? How far can we go to make our lives the very best from the human point of view?

With the Lucid Counsellor tragedy is no longer part of the immediate past and mythical characters, but suddenly encompasses all the citizens of Thebes. The tragedy, now, hovers in the air, is unpredictable and can appear and pour down on the citizens at any moment. It is the terror of tyranny, which you never know when it will tighten the noose round someone’s neck. It is the anguish and uncertainty that pollutes life, that lays siege to every event that is held, everywhere one goes, every word one says.

Let us sum up. The final text of *Antigona*, which achieves a balance of classic and modern elements, contributes a series of components that form part of modern tragedy: chance; irony, which, as Shakespeare shows, is not incompatible with tragedy; the sacrificed hero who assumes his fate and makes way for the anti-hero (the Lucid Counsellor)

or the passive victim; and, last of all, the lead character’s defence of his independence which leads to the subject of identity, one of the foundations of modern drama.

II

We may like Espriu’s work more or less, it may be more or less original, but I believe you cannot deny that it is a tragedy. And there are many tragedies like Espriu’s in the whole of the 20th century. So, where does the obsession with the death of tragedy that Nietzsche claims come from? The philosopher declares the death of the genre because good old Euripides introduced a dose of rationality that made the Dionysian bonfire – which he claims was the essence of the genre – fade away. Behind his *boutade* lies the setting out of a series of suggestive questions. But the German’s version, irrespective of how stimulating it may be and how it fascinates us, does not cease to be a reading, a partial version.

The most recent elegy was written by George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy*, a brilliant essay brimming with magnificent texts and audacious interpretations. In the first few pages he writes that from the glorious times of classic Greece “tragedy has silenced in theatre”, further on he claims that this form of theatre formed its definitive character in the 17th century. All subsequent attempts, as dramatically extraordinary as they may have been, are only partial versions, approximations. A pallid reflection of what tragedy should be. At the end of the book, after this spectacular death sentence, Steiner softens, as if trying not to upset: “it is also possible that tragedy has confined itself to changing its style and conventions”. No comment, for the moment. Not

everyone seems to think the same. Every now and then, it is not odd to come across the expression *modern tragedy*, you need only take a quick look in the jungle of the Internet. Be that as it may, however moribund, tragedy continues to fight on.

This yearning for ancient tragedy is nothing new and if we went back in history we might rather think of it as a cyclic phenomenon. Surprisingly, this lamentation only occurs with this genre. It is not at all common to see contemporary lyric dreamers grieve because nobody writes poetry like Pindar anymore, or the troubadours. Neither is there a demand to compose music like Mozart or Bach.

The fixation that has sometimes occurred with this genre makes me wonder whether the curse that pursued the house of the Labdacids has not sneaked in between theatre’s curtains; it is as if there was no other way of dealing with it. Or that it was imperative to write tragedy and do so as the founders of literature used to. In no way do I mean to say that it is redundant to ask whether it is possible to write tragedies today, or why, in tragic times like ours, nobody writes tragedies or writes new ones? What other times have not been tragic., we could add. How can we light up the stage when the media blinds us with the madness of the world? To speak of human misfortune is it merely tragedy that’s needed? Is it possible to activate a tragic sense of life outside of tragedy? Irrespective of the specific answers that may be given, and which everyone will resolve according to their personal interests, what matters is that the investigation itself lead one to reconsider whether the resources and prospects are appropriate for exploring specific effects and subjects, and that it asks

us to search deeply, as indeed was done before us, when confronting a specific problem.

To my modest understanding, when talking about tragedy I get the impression that we are perhaps taking it all too lightly, as, I am sure without noticing, we tend to discuss the subject as if it were an absolute object, like some closed, perfect circumference. Whoever reads Hegel, Nietzsche, Jaspers or even Steiner will discover that there are as many conceptions of tragedy as approaches adopted. Peter Szondi once said that tragedy did not exist as an essence, and before going down this path it would be a good idea to make it clear that tragic theatre, like any other genre, is not a closed book, it is an ongoing matter. The classics followed no particular recipe. They evolved, accepted, turned down and experimented with new concepts. They did not have a blinkered opinion of the genre, and nor should we fall into this temptation. Nowadays, no reader doubts that Shakespeare conceived great tragedies, but in his day the majority did, at least among experts. Even Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his works, said, “they are neither tragedies nor comedies, but rather compositions of some other kind”. What we today consider as indisputable unity, has not always been so. It is understandable that we should see it as a solid block, but at the same time we need to be conscious of the to-and-fros. Peter Szondi himself preferred to take on the question of tragedy from a more pragmatic perspective, though within Hegel’s orbit, and saw it as a dialectic mode of effective annihilation. That is to say, a clash of contradictions in a dialectic process that leads to a final result which, without necessarily disappearing, leaves an incurable wound in its absence.

George Steiner is of the opinion that when we refer to “classic theatre” we know what we are referring to; perhaps not totally accurately, but at least clearly enough to recognise it. In principle, many of us would agree. I would as well, as I can also agree with his brief definition. So, among other things, he says, “tragic theatre needs to start off from the point of catastrophe. Tragedies end up badly. The tragic character is destroyed by forces that cannot be completely understood or banished by rational caution”. Afterwards he adds that when the causes of the defeat are temporal, when the dilemma may be resolved by technical or social means, then we find ourselves before drama, but in no way before tragedy. There is no doubt that this is a right approach – and there may be some important ideas on the genre in these words – but it is also a bit limited because it is modelled on works along the lines of *Oedipus Rex*. Not all tragedies always meet all the tragic precepts. Conflict, catastrophe and pain tend to be defining features in this kind of plays, but it does not mean they always end badly. This is not the case in a significant number of titles, such as, for example Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, *The Suppliants*, or Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*. The latter, as it happens, has a happy ending, as the hero under the protection of Hercules returns to Troy: “Farewell, thou sea-girt Lemnos; and speed me with fair course, for my contentment, to that haven whither I am borne by mighty Fate, and by the counsel of friends, and by the all-subduing god who hath brought these things to fulfilment”.¹ Furthermore, inevitability is not always indispensable. I will only take one case. In *Seven against Thebes*, despite the final disaster, Aeschylus thinks that the death of Oedipus would have been avoided if Laios

had listened to the oracle, who warned him that to save Thebes he should have no descendents but, “succumbing to sweet ill counsel”, he took no heed. We also need to admit that some tragedies like Euripides’ *Ion* and *Alcestis* have very little of the tragic about them and possibly fall on the side of tragicomedy. In *Ion* Apollo, the father of the main character, rapes young girls, passes on false prophecies and is unable to escape the mess he has created. There is no need to be more tragic than the tragic authors. In fact, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which is basically a formal analysis, there is no trace of injured feelings.

Terrible suffering and pain are decisive in classic theatre, which wants to show, as Jean-Pierre Vernant states, the “illogical logic that governs the order of human activity”, but this does not mean that this conception necessarily tallies with our tragic sense of life, where the concept of life as something absurd, without meaning, has hold. The denouement of *Antigone* is destructive, terrifying, but does not enter the terrain of the absurd, simply because of the way that the lead character consciously assumes her destiny. The heroine fulfils her obligation and does not meet her death with sadness but rather, on the contrary, with a decided gait. But on the other hand, Aeschylus describes pain with indelible force because he considers it part of life, but also believes, as we see in *Eumenides* and *The Suppliants*, that the conflict may be resolved by reason and the institutions of the city, made into guarantors of justice and social order above all personal interests. The classics were of the opinion that misfortunes should not be overlooked. Horror has to be understood in order to be able to act. This is

why, beside or above the gains that may be attributed to justice, Aeschylus sculpts Cassandra’s cry in *Agamemnon* in such a way that, despite the centuries that have passed, it still makes the reader’s hair stand on end. Tragedy, on account of the civic role it exercised, had a positive value that today it obviously no longer has. The stage, the illustration of a shattered, problematic universe, was used to enliven discussion, accusations and understanding on the conflicts that affected the citizenry.

To close this account of some elements of tragic theatre I will quickly point out two more. The first, essential for Steiner: the “intolerable baggage of the presence of God”. It is patent that the presence of divinity in the ancient world, and the not so ancient world, is omnipresent. But the omnipresence and direct impact on the works I do not find so clear. The issue of predestination, of curses on certain families like the Agamemnon and Antigones, is obvious, but this is not a direct presence in the vital incidents that decide their lives. And if we look at the quoted work, *Philoctetes*, the intervention of Hercules is what prevents the hero’s disaster. In the case of Shakespeare, certainly, the matter is more dubious, especially if we look at some plays like *King Lear* or *Othello*. In all, without totally disappearing, the divine noose tightens the characters’ fate with less and less strength. In the second place, we should not limit the thematic nucleus to only the most deeply rooted motives. This should never be a closed space, by a long shot. We sometimes tip the balance in favour of dense works full of ethical tensions or a heavy intellectual load, but it would be worthwhile not to lose sight of those plays that express painful dilemmas in the lives

of anonymous characters, as is the case in *Trojan Women*. On this subject, Shakespeare was a true expert on the variety of tensions in human relationships.

III

I do not believe it is too outrageous to claim that modern dramatic language has taken on the aim of staging the *tragedy* of modern man. For this adventure authors needed a language that is more malleable than the thematic limitations and schematisations of clashes between characters. Drama needed to widen its story lines and conflicts, and experiment with languages, registers and forms of dramatic intensity (symbolic, expressionist, new scenography, etc.). After that, the expression of human suffering, the obsession with personal identity and internal tensions, alienation, the confrontation of the individual with his surroundings were now hatched under triviality, now through psychological introspection, now investigating a non-Aristotelian language advanced by German drama with Bertolt Brecht at the forefront. In the midst of this turbulent process of creation, authors never lost sight of tragedy, it could even be said they went into the subject with renewed intensity (we need only consider the appearance of theatrical rereadings of the classical myths), for one very simple reason: it is here that we find the genetic markers of the major conflicts of humankind. However, their readings were not always channelled into mobilising this theatrical formula, but rather formed part of a wider process of investigating *tragic language*, which often brought renovating modulations and a combination of theatrical registers (the grotesque, humour, etc.) to drama. This combination of elements ma-

kes it difficult today to demarcate the genres and identify a play with a specific genre.

This leaning for the Greek classics is understandable. After the euphoria for progress in the 19th century, came the cataclysms of the 20th century. With the two world wars, the outbreak of horror reached hitherto unseen proportions. And amongst this distress, as much as it may be claimed to be due to a madman or whatever excuse, everyone knew that these disasters were, unfortunately, the cause and effect, as it were, of modern society. How can this madness be *represented*? Is tragedy sufficiently tragic to implicitly express these living museums of horror? I am one of those who believe that it is pointless to get worked up asking why playwrights were unable to give shape to these horrors like the Greeks used to, as questions like these are more disturbing than productive. The classics did not write of *this* horror, they wrote of *their* horror. True enough, works were written on this subject and some were very worthy. But this is not the fundamental question we ask ourselves. It would be fair to believe that many authors considered the problem. As it would also be reasonable to assume that some authors thought that if they were unable to transcend the anecdotic, then perhaps the results would look more like a parody than anything else. Others avoided the subject simply out of respect for the living and the dead. In this context the proliferation of versions of classic plays is no sign of failure. Totally the opposite: for the authors who took this task on it was the only way to stage the different faces of horror, to envisage some of the questions involved in conflicts of this magnitude, to go from the personal anecdote to general reflection.

What is amazing about Steiner’s aforementioned book is that it passes, with a few exceptions, right over any exploration of the resources of modern drama. Even more so when one of the things he most values about classic theatre is its ability to translate myths and thought into theatrical language. Steiner admires this permeability in the ancient world, but he does not even consider the attempts in this century. And theatre people in the first half of the 20th century made titanic efforts, at least at some moments, to transform the life, thought and *mythologies* of their times into theatrical skin, this tragic language into a theatre of extreme situations. Sometimes familiar ceremonies or truth games will show us the destruction of the individual and a society dismembered by conventions and egotism (Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee). Others confront us in existentialist dramas with problems of conscience and desperate situations where the individual is called upon to exercise his freedom or his madness. The cries also appear in the distancing strategies of Bertolt Brecht who, despite not wanting to, achieves moments of emotive and tragic intensity in *Mother Courage*. Even from the trenches of anti-theatre, *Waiting for Godot*, considered by Samuel Beckett himself as a tragicomedy, does not cease to be a tragic anti-tragedy.

In this current of renewal in tragic theatre I need to bring up the figure of Josep Palau i Fabre in Catalan theatre, one of the few authors who reflected on the tragic mode and its evolution, and has done so in various lines. The most interesting of these include the works dedicated to the myth of Don Juan, from a viewpoint far removed from psychologies, and where the tragic

load is above all erected around this apathetic and desperate character, tormentor and victim, who is able to escape from the image of his person and lives condemned to compulsive seduction and perpetual dissatisfaction.

Over the last few years, Britain has shown signs that confirm a revival of tragic registers, events and authors that I am only partly familiar with. Before continuing, it would be good to point out, though it has probably little to do with theatrical languages, that some contributions to ethical thought in the last few decades have been based on a rereading of the Greek world, in some cases of tragedy, as is the case with Martha C. Nussbaum. But back to our thread. The strongest new defence of tragedy has been made by Howard Barker, author of powerful, original plays, who refuses to let himself be domesticated by the dominant culture, and who has written a combative defence of the genre: he rejects current tragedy (unemployment, drugs, violence) and demands connection with the compulsive, titanic pulsations of the great tragedies. He defends exploring the secrets of tragedy, some of which are yet to be discovered buried as they are under erudite rhetoric. He conceives the genre as a defiance of received knowledge. It is the greatest devastator of social order, the darkest and, also, the greatest affirmation of life, because standing on the edge of the abyss lets you express the inexpressible and the most complex of emotions.

Barker's tragic discourse attempts to remove itself from Shakespearean influence. Some of his best pieces are set the day after a catastrophe, whether post-revolutionary or post-war. Characterised by ex-

cesses, violence, by dark, oneiric atmospheres, by plays on identities, developmental leaps (from the tragic to the grotesque) and extreme circumstances to discover what the human spirit contains of the terrible and the magnificent, the rational and the irrational. As this is a universe that seeks to be amoral and rejects any reconciliation between the confronting parties, catharsis has little to play in his works. His most successful play is called *Scenes from an Execution*.

Today, the author who arouses greatest interest is the ill fated Sarah Kane, who from what I know pours all her passion into a theatre bristling with tension and cynical, spineless, arbitrary characters like the lead in *Phaedra's Love*. Excess, gratuitousness and a clipped yet tense language characterise this play that occasionally falls into the temptation of too many schematisations. This violent, passive and repulsive recreation of the tragic skeleton explores disturbing behaviour. I find that the play, which I read at lightning speed, offers a high-oc-tane perspective, though its literary objective is not very wide. Herein lies its virtue, it is able to inflate into gruesome tremor and rage situations that in other hands would be a pure exhibition of boredom and slaps in the face.

Sarah Kane's opus largely follows the line that seeks to theatricalise non-communication and the vagueness of its characters. The lead character in the piece is like a sleep-walker who goes neither forwards nor back. She knows she does not want to know. She rejects any affective tie, even love is a simple carnal transaction, and a bother to boot. In fact this is a character lost in the empty looking glass of her mind. This absolute resignation, and now I

speak in general terms, is also reflected in the language that can sometimes finish with a simple stammering.

Many modern-day authors decide on this area of theatre, but it is not the only one, by a long shot, when it comes to talking about the present. There are other alternatives that have no intention of shutting doors, but rather opening them, that do not banish questions of identity, even though we never find an answer, as we shall see further ahead.

Among the critics there is a certain inclination to compare the violent, grotesque aesthetics of Barker and Kane with Artaud, for the simple reason that this theatrical aggression requires a certain physical expressivity that shuns the more run-of-the-mill interpretations. It is a quick and easy association at first. But when you insist on it further, you soon realise that it is very superficial, because for Artaud the movement of the body and other resources were in no way a means of expression that reinforced the play, rather they were the final objective. Artaud yearned for the freeing of impulses, the frenzy of feelings. Delirium. This is very clear when we think of the work of Palau i Fabre, an admirer of the French artist who saw him as his source of inspiration. As he tells it, his stage aspirations, that to a certain extent lean towards tragedy, were incompatible with the hard core of Artaud's ideas. His ideals, if we ignore the more delirious side, can lead to proposals much like those made by *Fura dels Baus*, right now very removed from the shock sought by English authors.

Tragic language can lead to contrasting objectives, as we see in Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the*

Maiden and Edward Albee's *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia*. The first, written during the first steps to the recovery of democracy in Argentina, used violence and the catharsis of the story in an attempt to arouse the audience's conscience through terror and compassion. On the other hand, the second, subtitled "Notes Toward a Definition of Tragedy", aims to shake up American conventionalism. Albee erases the limits between genres and plays with black laughter and tears, he passes from the crudest pranks to astonishment and creates a drama on the breaking of conventions and brings out the strangest, most secret demons.

In the Catalan language we have Manuel Molins with *Trilogia de l'exili* (Trilogy of the exile) creating three expressive approaches to tragic language. Starting off with the figures of Nietzsche, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Wittgenstein we journey through the different stages of modernity. The characters, pure vital and intellectual energy, undertake a personal exploration to the limits of madness in search of their truth. They represent the cruelty of revelation, devastating as it may be. A journey to one's personal abyss, jolted by opposing tensions between rationality and irrationality, the tragic and the grotesque. In his play, *Dyónisos*, that has Nietzsche as its protagonist, we enter the Dionysian world of classic tragedy, while in *Els viatgers de l'absenta* (The travellers of the absinthe) we have two catastrophes: one, of Rimbaud who, obsessed with breaking conventions, ends up in the clutches of what he hated the most, death and a Christian burial; the other consists of Verlaine's existential torture, which goes on until the end of his life when he acknowledges the se-

cret that pursued him. The last work, *La màquina del doctor Wittgenstein* (Dr. Wittgenstein's machine), dedicated to Doctor Wittgenstein, is probably the most original and indirect representation of tragedy. Here we have three characters, the assassin, the doctor and the philosopher, representing, like the mask that accompanies the play, the multiple faces of personality and the complex interplay established between reality and appearances.

In the last issue of PAUSA, when Diana González was explaining the dramatic dimension of Sarah Kane, she quoted Michael Maffesoli, who declared that our current times, no matter the causes, are tragic. What times have not been so? Is life tragic, or do we perceive it as tragic? Can the tragic sense of life only be staged tragically? Reality has a thousand faces and we can describe it from many different perspectives; all will be or can be equally valid. What matters in the end is that the result be piercing and powerful.

Perhaps the defence of tragedy at this moment in time, owing to its complexity, is already a positive signal due to the simple fact that, in itself, it implies a pertinent question about reality that seeks to shake things up in the theatrical scene, which according to some comments is having too easy a time. In any case, what is most gratifying in what we have seen of authors who at some moment opt for tragic language is that they do not seek an established formula, but rather, as Barker and Albee have declared, their practice is guided by a desire to reconsider the genre and test intensities with the integration of different languages.

I do not know if tragedies are good for our times. I suspect that if it became standard currency its effect would be paralysing. What I do know is that if there is ever a need for an imperative, this has to emerge from the creative urgency of the author, and from nobody else.

Bibliography

In writing this adventure, apart from the above mentioned authors, I have been accompanied, and very well accompanied if I may say so, by: Albin Lesky, *Greek Tragedy*; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*; Eugenio Triás, *Drama e identidad*; Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, and *The Broken Mirror* by the latter.

¹ *The Tragedies of Sophocles*. Translated by Sir Richard C. Jebb. Cambridge University Press, 1904.

CONTEMPORARY TRAGEDY: a small survey

When it came to determining the scope of debate for this issue's dossier, PAUSA considered the meaning and relevance of concepts such as "contemporary tragedy", "contemporary tragic sentiment", "catastrophe" and "chaos". On the table remained questions such as:

- Which concepts of contemporary dramatic writing are able to get to grips with the idea of the tragic?
- Which authors?
- What do we understand by "theatre of catastrophe"?
- Can the aesthetics of "chaos" foster models of "contemporary tragedy"?
- Etc.

From the entire affair – the debate – emerged the need to transfer our questions to other people, to get a

better perspective, to receive added nuances. The results of this small survey, as you can see, have been very satisfactory.

In the end, the “question” was worded in the following terms:

Is it possible, today, to speak of tragic drama?

Which plays, from the last ten years, do you associate with the idea of tragedy? Which films? Why?

Is there some theoretical text, some essay that you feel is particularly significant to all of this?

And the results were the following:

JEAN-PIERRE SARRAZAC

If there is contemporary tragic in theatre, perchance it is merely a tragic that is far removed from tragedy and from the Aristotelian “beautiful animal”. No longer is there a grand heroic voyage. Simple life, everyday life. No longer is there a great reversal of fortune, a journey from happiness to misfortune, or the opposite. *Tension* there may be, but strictly speaking no longer is there dramatic progression. Repetition. Repetition in its nastiest form, totally stripped bare. Repetition as a tragic example of being-in-this-world.

Repetition/variation. Catastrophe no longer looms at the end of the road; it has now become preliminary, the grand opening. Theatre post-Auschwitz and post-Hiroshima. Theatre, from a metaphysical standpoint, of a being that has been cast into the world, of being there, an ever-suffering being,¹ for

which birth and death are the “same thing”. (Beckett)

I call this being the *Impersonality* in theatre. The word impersonal or, better said, transpersonal, is in itself fitting to sum up the human state. It plays every role. Sometimes Oedipus and sometimes the wandering Jew, Jacob or Othello, sometimes Antigone or Electra and sometimes Ophelia... It switches from one role to the next, from one mythical figure to another, until it finally uses up every single face of Man. A stranger to himself, the Impersonality is the tiny anti-hero of a *serial tragic*, the character of the *drama-of-life*.

I believe there are two texts which set the standard of this tragic, not one of a *drama-in-life*, with a beginning, a climax and a denouement, a well-balanced story, a reversal of fortune and “ultimate calm”, as is the case with the old tragedy according to Aristotle or Hegel, but one of a *drama-of-life* in its broadest sense and with all its restrictions. One of them dates back over 100 years, the other one is rather more recent: *The Tragical in Daily Life* by Maurice Maeterlinck, where for the first time, he deals with a tragic of happiness, a tragic of human fate generally; and “To Have Done with Judgment” by Gilles Deleuze (in *Critical and Clinical*) who, citing Kafka and Artaud, wonderfully mingles the tragic with cruelty.

I hear this tragic of a *drama-of-life* re-emerge in numerous modern and contemporary plays, from Strindberg to Sarah Kane. And, for instance, while I once again read *A summer's day*, the remarkable play by Jon Fosse, where a lady, who to me bears a resemblance to a character in Hammershoi's paintings,

spends her entire life, her entire existence at her window examining the fjord where her husband seems to have vanished as he was drawn out to sea in his boat...

The contemporary tragic as the unavoidably optimistic return to the scene of human suffering. As the creation of meaning based on this demonstrated lack of meaning of our presence in the world.

¹ Originally the author compared the “ever-suffering being” to an abandoned package, since the French expression “en souffrance” (in suffering) is used to refer to packages that are left uncollected at the post office.

FELIU FORMOSA

Tragedy takes into consideration the fact that there are always hidden, uncontrollable causes behind fate, behind human life. This doubtless undermines the Brechtian theories, but it has been found to be true. I consequently think that the tragic element is indeed prevalent in theatre. Can these causes be investigated to shed light on their consequences? The answer, from many manifestations of contemporary theatre, is no.

Tragedy is the story of lost battles, of man's defeats, and current tragedy is the story of modern man. It is therefore clear that nowadays it is possible to – and one does – talk of tragic drama. What is more, we are living in the right moment for tragedy.

I have just read a book by Lars Norén, *Chill*, where you anticipate the fatal ending: it is a tragedy.

A clearly “Aristotelian” author (in Brechtian terms) like Ibsen in-

cludes tragedies among his better-known pieces: *Spectres*, *Hedda Gabler*, *When We Dead Awaken*, *The Wild Duck*, etc.

I have a recent recollection of a modern tragic text: *Fireface*, by Marius von Mayenburg.

Theory? I remember how, during Brecht's heyday, Alfonso Sastre defended tragedy in a text appended to the Spanish edition of *Dreigroschenoper* (The Three-penny Opera), published by Aymà-Proa as part of their Voz-imagen collection. You can then read Brecht's texts to see the contrary arguments. Sastre considers tragedy as a chance at expressing the problems faced by modern day man and those which man has always faced.

German theatre uses the term *Tragödie* in a stricter classical sense and the term *Trauerspiel* in a more general sense, but preserving the ingredients of tragedy. This term must be translated as “tragedy”. Right now I am in the middle of translating Goethe's *Clavigo*, which the author defines as “*Trauerspiel*”.

XAVIER PÉREZ

In the field in which I normally work, film, the word tragedy has been struck off the traditional classification of genres. We talk of Westerns, film noir, adventure and science fiction films, war films and road movies, as well as comedies and melodramas, to mention two genres straight from theatrical tradition. In contrast to all of these, tragedy has never been deemed a category characteristic of film. But the fact that tragedy has never brought about a specific cinemato-

graphic genre does not mean that a good many films are not invested with a dramatic substance that, on occasion, adopts a structure and arouses receptive sentiments that the audience cannot fail to recognise as tragic. Throughout the 20th century there has been a good deal of evidence to suggest that tragedy has infused the work of certain filmmakers, evidence that demands attention in the modern world. Indeed, some of the most important films that, year upon year, dignify the poor fare on our billboards may well be classified as contemporary tragedies.

Within industrial cinema – in other words, within the so-called “quality” cinema basically linked to American production – this tragic contamination has precedents in certain examples of film noir and, of course, Westerns, a terrain where the revenge of *Orestes* has been updated and reread, and where the scapegoat – often some itinerant gunman – proliferates, which the community then sacrifices or expels for the sake of progress. Nevertheless, the traumatic evolution of the West in the age of globalisation and the inherent contradictions of the various power structures that control the operation of our wealthy societies have encouraged filmmakers to continue to explore the great tragic tension between civilisation and barbarism, employing a horrifying, tormented adaptation of traditional genres. Films like *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River* by Clint Eastwood, *Seven* and *Fight Club* by Dave Fincher, *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* by David Lynch, *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* by M. Night Shyamalan, cannot be classified as anything but contemporary tragedies that, often with oedipal connotations, propose traumatic forms of

anagnorisis where contemporary subjectivity faces the certainty of its own guilt and the cathartic assumption of the contradictions upon which the precarious concepts of order are based.

The ease with which industrial cinema has adopted the forms and processes of tragedy is doubtless due to the archetypal and mythological force that this kind of cinema has always displayed in its stories, and the ease with which myth and tragedy have been able to relate to one another throughout the millennia. Although from a very different geographical origin, some examples of Eastern cinema, from the films of Takeshi Kitano to those of Park Chan Wook, fit this same fertile ability to combine myth, archetype and generic language in new tragic discourses on current imagery of revenge.

Though it may seem less versatile in this capacity to archetypically reread the narrative, contemporary European cinema does not stray far from the tragic paradigm in the stories created by some of its authors, who are particularly sensitised to condemning the violence with which the socialisation of human beings is controversially articulated and their difficult relationships with a political terrain that is in a permanent state of disintegration. Names like Michael Hanecke, Emir Kusturica and Theo Angelopoulos are undeniable cultivators of the cinematographic tragedy genre, even though the intellectual tradition that these authors belong to, inevitably passed through the Brechtian sieve (or poetic fantasy in the case of Kusturica), calls for reflective, unemotive work that avoids the cathartic immediacy of industrial cinema. But, in one way or another, a review of contemporary cinema guided by the idea of

tragedy would help us see that any major contemporary concept that attempts to express, free of euphemisms, the increased confusion of the world in which we live needs to employ the tools of tragic drama, a process that, most likely, will continue to shape a genuine predominant canon in cinematographic narrative in the 21st century.

JAUME MELENDRES

If I am not mistaken, over the course of this controversy so characteristic of the Romantic period (ultimately, there is a certain debate surrounding the existence of borders between the arts, on one hand, and within the arts, on the other, a central theme in the ideological debate of the 19th century), philosophers – for example, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche – opted for the possibility of a ‘contemporary’ tragedy. On the other hand, philosopher-economists (in other words Marx) condemned the very idea of contemporary tragedy, maintaining – with good cause – that the social conditions that generated it had already faded away. Among dramatists there are all sorts of views: Anouilh and Jordi Teixidor believe in such a thing as ‘contemporary’ tragedy and they strive to prove it; Dürrenmatt (for the same reasons as Marx) thinks not.

I feel it is pointless to comment on this question nowadays, unless we first accurately define what tragedy is, something that, as well as seeming impossible (given past experience), I do not believe to be necessary if we take a post-Romantic perspective, which would equally rule out national teams in sports (including Catalan ones) and generic divisions, the source of so much violence in the world.

However, if we take tragedy to be a dramatic structure characterised by an **indestructible** and relatively **short chain** of causalities that **invariably** lead to a **single** possible denouement in order to confront the difficult coexistence of irreconcilable values in a single person, tragedy continues to be one of the most successfully cultivated genres by the best in contemporary theatre, championed by Koltès, Fassbinder, Deutsch, Melquiot (and a good many others) and an almost infinite list of filmmakers headed, naturally, by Hitchcock. Television, on the other hand, with its serials, raises the standard of anti-tragedy inasmuch as it implicitly seeks the non-existence of a denouement (so long as the audience is willing) and so creates mechanisms for generating minor conflicts *ad libitum* to mask the presence of any kind of major conflict – the series starring an American female judge (*Judging Amy*) is a splendid example.

TONI CABRÉ¹

More than forty years ago, in *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner theorised on the death of tragedy based, above all, on the bewilderment and exhaustion shown by dramatists since the days of Shakespeare. Even so, at the end of his essay, he left the door open to some hope for survival. The most suggestive, in my opinion, is his feeling that tragedy is evolving into new styles and conventions. Could current-day tragicomedies be the heir of classic tragedy?

In 1984 Patrice Pavis, in his *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, defined tragicomedy as the failure of tragedy, quoting pieces by Ionesco and Dürrenmatt for their absurd, derisory and grotesque content. Also Vladimir and

Estragon, in their absurd waiting, hold a tragicomical dialogue in Beckett’s piece. And I believe that Valle-Inclán does the same with his grotesqueness, Brecht with the distancing of epic theatre, Fo with his satires, Mamet with plays like *Edmond* and Albee with *The Goat*. Please forgive the jumble, but I believe we are dealing with authors who write plays that contain a tragic undertone, with heroes condemned by devastating natural forces and even more devastating human weaknesses, but with decidedly tragicomic registers. Nowadays, therefore, contemporary tragicomedy is the evolution of classic tragedy.

Of all the tragicomedies, the ones that I am personally attracted to the most are those that begin with a catastrophe. I like seeing the characters struggling to survive, to understand, to hold their head up high, to justify themselves... Yes, justify themselves. Because the characters that interest me are never completely innocent. They are also the cause of the catastrophes they suffer. This is why they often end the play supposedly happy, flapping about like butterflies. Butterflies that, by their movement, we feel will aggravate further catastrophes. And so, another tragicomedy will begin.

¹ Toni Cabré. Author of the tragicomedy *Teoria de catàstrofes*. Pagès editors, 2004

(Texts.)

CROSSINGS

by Ahmed Ghazali

Characters

1st actor: Jacques Benachir, the author

2nd actor: the author’s double, Wafi, Amadou

3rd actor: Maurice the publisher, Boubacar the director
The actress: the wife, Jeanne the biographer, Rokiatu,
The multiplicity of roles portrayed is not just a question of economics, it relates to important factors: split personalities, parallels and contradictions in Jacques’ two worlds, etc. In addition to these characters that are essential in following Jacques’ journey, other secondary figures make their brief appearances (the vendor, the beggar, the masks, the disciples of the Sufi, etc).

TIME ONE

THE AUTHOR (*To the audience*): I am what in today’s world is called an author. With this seemingly simple and innocent word I had to fight like a monster. It all began the day I returned from a long stay in Africa. I entered the office and found a page of text on the screen.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE (*Whistling, with a suitcase in his hand*): Who wrote it, this? Did I write it?!

THE AUTHOR: I wrote this page just before I left, but I no longer recognised it. My writing has turned strange on me. I have spent months and months in crisis trying to decipher this mystery, to end up discovering something terrible: what my hand writes does not come out of me. How could I explain it? When I start writing, the page fills before a single word comes out of me.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: Where the hell does this text come from?

THE AUTHOR: Torrents of words gush from my head. Not one is born of my body. Since that day I’ve had an obsession: I have to stop this racket in my head. I have to access the blank page of my body.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: The blank page!

THE WIFE and the PUBLISHER enter, who stand on either side of the AUTHOR’S DOUBLE.

THE WIFE: What’s the matter, darling? Something’s up since you returned from Africa.

THE PUBLISHER: You no longer write, Jacques. We’re still waiting for the second volume.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: The blank page, shit!

THE PUBLISHER: Change subjects, Jacques. Write about Afghanistan.

THE WIFE (*Reading a magazine*): An American soldier falls in love with an Afghani woman and he puts on a burkha to enter Kandahar. (*She throws him the magazine*.) You have to write this story, Jacques.

THE PUBLISHER: An article about you. (*He throws him the newspaper*.) You don’t sell so well now, Jacques!

THE WIFE: Please, the little girl wants an autograph! I promised her.

THE PUBLISHER: The book presentation. It’s essential that you be there. It says so in the contract, Jacques.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE (*Writing*): They kiss...

THE PUBLISHER: He takes her to the bedroom...

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: He takes her to the bedroom...

THE AUTHOR: This isn’t yours!

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: This is not mine!

THE PUBLISHER: It is, it is... Carry on, Jacques. He takes her to the bedroom and embraces her strongly...

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: And embraces her strongly (*He stands up, the computer keyboard continues on its own*.) Who, inside me, is writing this? Who?

THE WIFE: Jacques, we no longer go out, we no longer see any-

one! I’ve had enough of your writer’s crises.

THE PUBLISHER: The latest Malovich. Marvellous. You must read it. (*He throws him the book*.)

THE WIFE: The charity dinner, don’t forget it. (*She throws him the invitations*.)

THE PUBLISHER: An article about you. (*He throws him the magazine*.)

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE *drowns under the pile of objects thrown at him: newspapers, books, videotapes... Furthermore, the soundscape becomes a cacophony: advertising, music, news clips, etc.*

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE (*Fed up*): The blank page!

THE AUTHOR: The mud was drowning me. The blank page of my body was inaccessible. My body! Where was my body?

THE WIFE: Duck in Madagascar green-pepper sauce.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: Delicious!

THE PUBLISHER: Wait till you see the dessert.

THE WIFE: It’s antigymnastic, darling.

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: It relaxes me.

THE PUBLISHER: Shiatsu! I recommend it to you, Jacques.

THE WIFE: We have to go to the Chinese they just opened next door.

THE AUTHOR: In short, I was split in two. The body and the head lead their own independent lives and do not meet.

THE WIFE: A 1914 Bordeaux, try it!

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: Mmm!

THE PUBLISHER: A masterpiece, this novel!

THE AUTHOR’S DOUBLE: Genuinely post-modern!

THE WIFE: Make me yours!
THE AUTHOR: Absent to one another, they sought satisfaction in bulimia.

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE *is split in two. One moment he is a spirit (frenetically typing, collecting awards, reading newspapers, etc.), the next he is a body (he gets a blow job, he lifts weights, opens a bottle of champagne, etc.) The rhythm speeds up all the time.*

THE WIFE: Fuck me like a whore!
THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: Yes, whore! Whore!

THE PUBLISHER: The text, Jacques, you have to enter for the awards!
THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: Yes, awards! Awards!

THE AUTHOR: It was the world I lived in.

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: It was the world we lived in.

THE AUTHOR: Our gods were Descartes and Claudia Schiffer.
THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: We all felt American.

THE AUTHOR: Our spirits soared over the planet Mars, following the tracks of extraterrestrials.

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: Our bodies laid under the microscopes of biologists who would amuse themselves stirring our genes.

THE AUTHOR: This is what we called progress.

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: And this comforted us...

Music and the voice of Léo Ferré: «Mais... la solitude, la solitude...».

THE WIFE: Did you love me?

THE AUTHOR AND AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: What is love?

THE WIFE: Give my body to science. (*She fires a gun at her head and falls.*)

THE AUTHOR (*Packing his bags.*): Science, I don't give a damn about it.

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: I don't give a damn.

THE AUTHOR: If one must die...

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: Die.

THE AUTHOR: When the time comes, let my death be a party.

THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE: A party.

THE AUTHOR and THE AUTHOR'S DOUBLE *leave in opposite directions.*

THE PUBLISHER: You can't leave like this, Jacques! You've signed a contract! You can't do it!

Lights out.

TIME TWO

1

Noise and music in a sub-Saharan square.

WAFI: And who doesn't know of the cultural centre? There are two tall buildings in the city, the taller one is the Central Bank, and the smaller one the cultural centre. I'll take you there, brother. And as Allah is pleased we should meet, blessings be on Allah...

JACQUES: Don't waste my time, lad.
WAFI: I see by your noble face that you have come on a great journey...

JACQUES: Not at all!

WAFI: You are interested in the desert.

JACQUES: You're wrong, lad, I'm not a tourist.

A vendor approaches.

A VENDOR: Mango, banana, papaya!

WAFI: Who said anything about tourism?

JACQUES: Take me to the cultural centre.

A VENDOR: Mango, banana, papaya!
WAFI (*Makes a signal to the vendor.*): *Wallahe*, brother, first taste the fruit of our African soil.

JACQUES: I don't like fruit.

A VENDOR: What did he say?

WAFI: Give him three bananas and a mango.

JACQUES: I said no! I won't eat it, this fruit.

A VENDOR (*Is paid and leaves.*): Mango, banana, papaya.

JACQUES: And now what do I do with all this?

WAFI: The Sahara on a camel. Fifteen thousand a day. The price for a friend, *wallahe*.

A beggar approaches with his singsong.

JACQUES: The cultural centre.

WAFI: And there's also the city. I'll be your guide and your friend.

JACQUES: The cultural centre!

The beggar blasts his singsong at JACQUES.

JACQUES: Take the fruit, old man. (*The beggar leaves softly singing praises.*). You were right lad... The fruit was useful.

WAFI: Welcome to Africa, Jacques!

2

AMADOU has finished his reading. Applause.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: Bravo! You're Africa's Verlaine.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: You should be published, Amadou. We'll find something in Paris.

AMADOU: I have read this poem in your honour, Jacques.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Welcome to Bamako, Jacques.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: Nobody would believe it! Jacques in the Sahel!

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: The cultural centre is in celebration.

AMADOU: All the Sahel is in celebration.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Your wife's suicide has been hard for you, Jacques.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: I'm so sorry.

AMADOU: So sorry.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: You'll be OK here.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: You'll get your inspiration back.

AMADOU: Most certainly.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: When you've had a rest, Jacques...

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: Yes, when you've had a rest...

AMADOU: Rest first, Jacques...

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Afterwards we'll talk of the ceremony in your honour.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: We'll get on with the biography.

AMADOU: You'll read my manuscript.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: All the sponsors have said yes, the Ministry of Culture, the Central Bank, the oil company.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: Above all relax.

AMADOU: There's no hurry.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Forget time.

ALL: Welcome to Africa, Jacques!

3

BOUBACAR: Rokiadou, but you're already a woman! Has my retreat been that long?

ROKIATOU: At last you come back to be with us, Master Boubacar. All this time the people have been deprived of your light.

BOUBACAR: Don't you know, my girl, that I shut myself away for the *Istikhara*? At my age I need to appoint a successor among my disciples. This is why I seek God's counsel.

ROKIATOU: I know nothing of your science, but I see the jewel leaving our *zauia*'s courtyard and my heart senses something dark.

The disciples become irritable and grumble.

BOUBACAR: Rokiadou, you carry an unease greater than yourself. Do not be sad, because today is a day different from all the others. If I leave my retreat, it is to fulfil a duty of hospitality.

ROKIATOU: I hear the dogs bark. Who is our guest?

BOUBACAR: Someone who comes from far away yet, in my heart, he feels so near...

WAFI and JACQUES enter.

WAFI: *Assalamoaleikum*. Master Boubacar, let me introduce you to my friend Jacques. He would like to live with us in the town.

JACQUES: *Assalamoaleikum*.

4

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: A burkha like Afghani women wear. That's what we need in Africa. Long sleeves for protection from mosquitoes. Leave nothing exposed. That's what my guide says. The meaning of my life, Jacques, is to capture yours. A postgraduate, a master, a doctorate on your work. And now this biography. A monument, he said. A deplorable hotel, to be honest. There isn't a door that shuts. They don't like shutting doors, here. There no such thing as a private life, here. That's what Amadou says. He's nice, that boy. He's sometimes hard on Africa. Radical. But handsome and well educated. A good thing he's around. I don't speak to anyone. Maurice, on the other hand, is authoritarian, full of himself. Between you and me, don't trust him. This event in the National Museum, I'll present it, Jacques. I'll play the master of ceremonies. I'll speak of you. Of how I've devoted my life to you.

Of your place in contemporary literature. Who's calling? Come in and shut the door. The mosquitoes. No ice. Forbidden. The bottle. Open it. In front of me. The top popping. I need to hear it. My guide says so. I'm not that fond of it, life. Don't deceive yourself. There are great challenges before us, this biography. Let's say next week, Jacques? We need to begin, we need to get things going...

5

In the hall, between the street and the courtyard of a house.

ROKIATOU: Come in, Jacques. Don't stay in the hall.

JACQUES: No.

ROKIATOU: At least come in to the courtyard. I can't see you in the dark.

JACQUES: It's better like this.

ROKIATOU: I want to see you close up.

JACQUES: I'm not worthy.

ROKIATOU: Then go. I have to finish supper.

JACQUES: Isn't it true that the hall is for those who are neither strangers no close friends? Let me stay here. I know who I am.

ROKIATOU: There's a wall between us that you don't want to cross.

JACQUES: First I have to arrive.

ROKIATOU: I don't follow you.

JACQUES: It's better like that. The living know nothing of vampires, but vampires keep the memory of life.

ROKIATOU: You always speak of vampires, you do.

JACQUES: I am one.

ROKIATOU: What's a vampire?

JACQUES: Poor foolish girl! Leave me.

ROKIATOU: Don't play with me, Jacques. The time for love will soon be upon me and I'll open myself to you.

6

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR *is having supper. A girl serves him his meal while a boy plays the kora.*

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Another glass, Jacques. A good wine. From the ambassador's private cellar. Honestly, Jacques, it's not week, Jacques? We need to begin, we need to get things going...
I have the responsibility to warn you for your own health, Jacques. The mosquitoes. It's no joke, malaria. And the bathrooms. You know well enough. A hole. Your publisher is worried. He wants you to call him. This event at the National Museum is promising, Jacques. The sponsors have said yes. The Ministry of Culture, the Central Bank, the oil company. All are aware of the challenge. There will even be people coming from the metropolis. The spirit of Rimbaud. This is what I want to create. The trouble is that you will not be easy to find. And we have to work together. Take my mobile phone. Let's do it this way. Twenty years in Africa, Jacques. I've given it my all. I've tripled the Culture budget. All the artists here I've discovered myself. The National Museum, I created it. The first time I ever talked of a museum they all fell about laughing. What? A museum? What for? Africans don't like museums. They never go. We have salvaged treasures from oblivion. Do you see this Dogon mask over the piano? I found it in Bandiagara. The children where playing with it in the middle of a field. It cost me a sweet. This is Africa. If you like, I'll lend you some books on the Griots. In the centre we have an-

thropological dossiers, archives... I will bring specialists over, lecturers, but sleeping over in the country... I now have problems with the hotel. We were counting on you. The National Museum and nowhere else. I already see you in the dusk speaking with African gods as a background. I see you like *kora*? Me too...

7

JACQUES: Is she pretty?

WAFI: Like a full moon, Jacques. All this I do for her. Her father said, "Two camels and gold". I looked him straight in the eyes and said "You will have what you want". And that same day I headed to Bamako.

JACQUES: And how much do you have now?

WAFI: I've put together half the sum. If I find a tourist who wants me to take him to the Sahara, I'll have what I need. *Wallahé*, Jacques, you will like our country.

JACQUES: Get that idea out of your head, Wafi.

WAFI: You're not a tourist. I know that.

JACQUES: I'll find you one.

WAFI: Our Master Boubacar is very fond of you. He only speaks of you.

JACQUES: He is also my father.

WAFI: Be warned, Jacques. The disciples speak ill of you. They say that because of you, Boubacar no longer goes to the mosque.

8

JACQUES: The disciples give me disapproving looks.

BOUBACAR: They are jealous of our friendship.

JACQUES: What are those books they always carry?

BOUBACAR: Is it not with the Book that you conquered us? They be-

lieve they can counterattack with the Book. This is what Allah calls your ancestors and mine in the Koran: the people of the Book.

JACQUES: What do they think of you?

BOUBACAR: I am the last Sufi. They are no longer inspired by my world. When they were small, they all gathered around me and flooded me with their lively, generous gaze. One day a plane flew over our sky and all raised their eyes. It stole the gaze of the children and I never found it again. *(Pause.)* That gaze, Jacques, I sometimes see it again in your eyes.

9

AMADOU: Stop your noise, I'm working! When I heard you were coming to live in the Sahel, Jacques, my life received meaning. Since then I write like a madman. Sleepless nights. Trying to finish this manuscript so Jacques will read it. You're my idol, Jacques, my fetish author, you know. When I read your books it's like seeing my reflection in the mirror. Your stories are mine. Your words too. But I must admit that I don't understand it, Jacques. Going to live far away from us, outside the town, in the house of that... I'm sorry, Jacques, but he's a charlatan. I won't go on. You'll find out for yourself.

THE MOTHER *(Voice over):* Amadou, come give your auntie a kiss, she's going!

AMADOU: Screw her! This is Africa, Jacques. The auntie comes with such a rabble that it's like a football team, and it's a commotion all day long. It's impossible to write or read in peace. And I'm supposed to say "Good morning auntie, thank you auntie for turning up unexpected, without being

invited with your football team that makes a shit mess throughout the house". One last touch and I've finished the manuscript.

THE MOTHER *(Voice over):* Amadou, take the bread to the baker's!

AMADOU: The bread to the baker's! Public bakeries, Jacques. Public baths. Public fountains. Public shitters. This is Africa. *(Towards the window.)* Right, Moussa! Take the bread to the baker's. Here, buy yourself a sweet... What do you say? Throw it here; I'll keep it for you. *(He catches a ball.)* That's how it is, Jacques. You have to make a deal. At first I would say "I don't give a toss about your bread!" But in the evening, when I'd sit at the table to eat, mother would throw raw dough on my plate.

THE MOTHER *(Voice over):* And I don't give a toss about your books!

AMADOU: Stop your noise, I'm working! I couldn't shut my eyes last night. You know why, Jacques? A neighbourhood wedding. They set up speakers. The whole neighbourhood awake. They were nice, they invited us. My father and all the family went, but I said no. I don't give a toss about your wedding! I don't know them, those people. I have nothing to say to them. No common interests. The whole night with the walls shaking with drums. This is Africa, Jacques. Going to a wedding is a torment, not going is a torment. An intellectual endeavour, a friendship between writers. That is what I want to have with you, Jacques. This event in the National Museum... I'm counting the days. I'll read a fragment from your latest novel. I'm sure you'll recognise yourself in my reading. I can't wait. See you soon, Jacques...

10

The National Museum. Statues and masks.

MASK 1: Are you asleep?

MASK 2: No.

MASK 3: I can no longer enjoy my midday naps with all this travelling.

MASK 4: It's so nice here!

MASK 1: Ah, Yes, it's quiet. Apart from a few tourists every now and then, nobody comes to bother us.

MASK 2: If only the ticket clerk would sleep without snoring. He puts me on edge.

MASK 3: Weren't you going to tell us your story, you there who's just arrived at the museum?

MASK 4: It all began when they came to get me. They told the town's people "Let us have the mask for the exhibition". The town's people said "We don't want anything to do with exhibitions". They then sent the police, the army, the Ministry of Culture, UNESCO, the French ambassador and the International Anthropology League. Before this invasion of civilised people, the town's people thought it more prudent to sacrifice me. The town's chief came to see me. He led me to think it was my fault, attracting all those people, and that the town had no more use for me. He threw me to the crowd. I fell on Levi-Strauss' head.

Laughter.

MASK 1: And the poor Dogon mask? He's still bored to death in London.

MASK 2: Ay, these tours, they really take it out of me!

MASK 3: I'll soon be able to speak every language in Europe.

MASK 4: Queues and more queues!
What are they coming to see?

MASK 1: And those guides, explaining everything about us...

MASK 2: Sometimes I'd like to be an author and write about all the foolish remarks I've heard in museums.

MASK 3: I'd tell the story of that painter in Paris, who said within earshot that Picasso had understood nothing about African masks.

MASK 1: The worst I ever saw was in Canada. The first night of the exhibition, when they were closing the museum, just when I thought "Phew! At last I'll be able to have a quiet night", I saw a group of women sneaking into the museum. They laid out a mat before me, undressed and began to caress one another. I was flabbergasted! They didn't stop pestering me all night long. One kept saying "Oh, goddess, tell me of the Golden Age". Another, "We shall fight, we shall again find the lost paradise". And like that till dawn. How disgusting!

Laughter.

MASK 4: I hear noise!

MASK 2: Weren't they bringing the new god today?

MASK 3: Who could it be? I thought the gods of Africa were already all here.

MASK 1: How odd!

A group of people enter. Grotesque dresses for a magic ritual, processional music, etc.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: Yes, up high, really up high, next to the gods, that's right!

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Here it is, Jacques' major book. Written in golden letters. My country is proud to give it to you.

AMADOU: It will be on all the programmes, in every African home. It will replace the Bible.

JACQUES: Get me down, I need to pee!

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: They're memories of the time when you were a man, Jacques. Your characters pee, but not you.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: You're the author, you're God.

ALL: Author, our God, we worship you. You create us. You portray us. Make us live in your novels. Make us live in your head. In your head! In your head!

JACQUES suddenly wakes up and realises he has had a bad dream after dozing off in the museum.
MAURICE THE DIRECTOR, JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER and AMADOU enter.

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Already here, Jacques? Perfect. There's a lot of people coming.

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: Jacques, I'll ask you two or three questions on your private life and then we'll get into literature...

AMADOU: Jacques, I propose we start by reading the epilogue...

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: Where are you going, Jacques? You can't leave just like that! You can't stand us up!

11

A racket in the zauia.

DISCIPLE 1: What?

DISCIPLE 2: Sorry?

DISCIPLE 3: That... tourist, you appoint him as your successor and Master of the *zauia*?

DISCIPLE 4: Our spiritual guide? A foreigner?

DISCIPLE 1: Someone who is not circumcised?

DISCIPLE 2: A white man?

DISCIPLE 3: An infidel!

DISCIPLE 4: We should have known.
DISCIPLE 1: You make friends with this foreigner.

DISCIPLE 2: You invite him to our sacred *zauia*.

DISCIPLE 3: And now you make him our guide!

DISCIPLE 4: You're an apostate!

DISCIPLE 1: *A kafir!*

DISCIPLE 2: Brothers! Our faith is under threat. The time for the Jihad is upon us!

DISCIPLE 3: Let us save our religion, let's kill this *kafir-billah!*

ALL: Let's kill him! Let's kill him!
Let's kill him!

BOUBACAR suddenly wakes up and realises it was a bad dream. By his headboard he finds ROKIATOU and WAFI.

ROKIATOU: Master, you have had a bad dream. You're all sweat!

WAFI: Master, the disciples are waiting in the courtyard, they are getting restless.

BOUBACAR: Tell them I have nothing to announce today. To come back tomorrow.

12

AMADOU: Jacques, I don't know why you've brought me here, to this noisy square. It's foolish. I won't read you my manuscript here. Let's go to a quiet café. I know a Lebanese one in the outskirts, very pleasant. They play sonatas by Mozart and Bach as background music. Very inspirational. We should be grateful to the Lebanese. They understand what Africa needs. Air-conditioned cafés, modern restaurants, supermarkets. I never come to this square. It makes me sick. It symbolises our intellectual backwardness. I don't understand why you decided on this place,

Jacques. This ceremony in the National Museum! You put us in a right fix, Jacques. At first I was livid. I wasn't able to put on my show the way I wanted. Afterwards I amused myself watching Maurice and all those snobs with their arses in the air. We agreed to meet in the square, in front of the mosque. But where in the square? And to not screw it up, I walked around and looked. As if it was my first time here. Look at these charlatans. Storytellers, fortune-tellers, snake charmers. Our middle ages, Jacques. You don't like me saying it. We're in the same trade as they are, you used to like to say. The same trade...

PASSER-BY 1: Look! A young man! Normally you only see old people here.

PASSER-BY 2: He seems to want to say something.

PASSER-BY 3: He's holding some papers in his hands.

PASSER-BY 1: No one's ever seen a young man doing anything in this square.

PASSER-BY 2: In jeans and glasses, on top of it all.

PASSER-BY 3: Let's sit and wait.

PASSER-BY 1: What are you going to do? Tell stories? Magic tricks?

PASSER-BY 2: Come! Let's form a circle!

13

JEANNE THE BIOGRAPHER: ... Today, Thursday, 24 May, I am recording the sounds in this mythical square that the author, Jacques Benachir, was so fond of going to. Six months after the tragic events in the National Museum, no one has any idea of Jacques' whereabouts. My life, the life of Jeanne the biographer, has become a search for the invisible...

14

MAURICE THE DIRECTOR: A million francs for whoever can tell us where that bastard is! You're getting on my wick, Jacques. You're poisoning my life. I was so quiet till you arrived. Everyone's after me. Where's Jacques? What's Jacques up to? What do I know! If you don't now, who should? And they're right, Jacques. Culture, here, is me. It's my domain. I control everyone who comes in and goes out of my cultural realm. And you have entered my domain, Jacques. Well inside. Two million for whoever finds him, but two million doesn't mean anything to these natives. In Paris they think you've gone crazy, that you're dead. And the more you disappear, Jacques, the more they get excited, and the more I get blamed. You didn't take care of him, says the culture minister. You didn't look after him well enough, says the ambassador. You didn't milk him like a cow, says the director of the Central Bank. Your publisher, dying to have done with it all. Every day, fax after fax. Haven't you found him? Has he left some manuscript behind, letters, something? Have a good look. Three million for whoever tells us! Yes, that's right, three million...

15

WAFI: I'm going back to the Sahara. I don't care about the money.

JACQUES: Wait a bit longer. I'll find you one.

WAFI: You always say the same.

JACQUES: Wait a bit. I'll keep my promise.

WAFI: Life in the *zauia* has become hell.

JACQUES: Give me a week.

WAFI: One week, Jacques.

JACQUES: I need a canoe for tonight.

16

JACQUES and ROKIATOU in a canoe in the middle of the Niger.

ROKIATOU: Jacques, what are you playing at? We come here every evening, to the middle of the river and wait for the sun to set.

JACQUES: Don't come near me! It is I who has to come towards you.

ROKIATOU: Then come.

JACQUES: Not now. Carry on talking.

ROKIATOU: And what do I say?

JACQUES: Tell me what you see on either shore.

ROKIATOU: Why do you shut your eyes?

JACQUES: Your prophet says that you rape a woman with the eyes.

ROKIATOU: He also says that you should love one another in the dark.

JACQUES: How right he is! The vampire has teeth and I have eyes. Never trust a white man's eyes.

Fishermen singing.

ROKIATOU: Can you hear that, Jacques? It's the song of the fishermen as they return to the harbour. Their canoes glide along the river like a lover's caress. The sun is a ball of red fire falling behind the town and the children take their last swim of the day. How happy they are splashing about in the water! Look, Jacques, they're waving at us, they send us their laughter. Their ripples rock the canoe, do you feel them?

JACQUES: That's it! I'm there!

ROKIATOU: Are you weeping?

17

BOUBACAR: Jacques, we can only meet in secret. I can no longer protect you. You must leave.

JACQUES: Where to?

BOUBACAR: Don't ask me any more questions! Open your eyes. Look for a signal.

JACQUES: Good bye...

BOUBACAR: Jacques... I've had a dream...

JACQUES: Yes?

BOUBACAR: Leave. I'll lead you the way.

Like your body gives birth to the dunes, oh, desert.

Look, my Dogon friends. Be my witnesses

Look how I drive the stake into the vampire's heart

And I savour my dissolution in the rocks.

First creation.

The uproar in my head falls silent.

My breath is about to unite with yours, oh, desert.

The rest is silence.

Sing, Wafi, sing...

THE END

TIME THREE

1

WAFI: Take another step. Now open your eyes. It's the highest point in Bandiagara.

JACQUES: What are those white blotches I see in the distance?

WAFI: Can't you tell they're dunes? They were not to see two years ago. The desert advances, Jacques. It makes one afraid, *wallahe*. Let's hurry. It'll take us a whole day to go down the cliff.

JACQUES: Go ahead, I'll follow you in a bit.

WAFI: You'll lose me. It's a meandering path.

JACQUES: Then sing, Wafi, sing. Your voice will guide me.

WAFI goes down the cliff.

2

JACQUES: My page is blank!

Advance no more, desert.

Have pity on our indecency.

I come towards you.

I will sink to my knees in your burning sand

And take on vows of silence.

Sing, Wafi, sing.

I will write when my flesh gives birth to the words